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By James H. Rubin  
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A top Justice Department official said today the government's witness protection program, which grants new identities to convicted criminals, is an essential weapon in the fight against organized crime.

Associate Attorney General Rudolph W. Giuliani said that without the program "literally hundreds, perhaps thousands of criminals would be walking around undetected." A crackdown against the Mafia would be impossible if the government couldn't promise protection to witnesses by relocating them with new identities, he added. He also told a House Judiciary subcommittee that despite "horror stories" involving witnesses who returned to lives of crime, the government has placed tighter controls over the program. "Substantial improvements have been made," he said. Giuliani also opposed a plan to establish a special right to sue the government by innocent victims of protected witnesses.

The government changes only the name of the witnesses, he said. "Ultimately, it can't have the responsibility for changing their behavior," he said.

The subcommittee heard testimony Thursday that some convicted criminals, assigned a new identity after cooperating with the government, have gone on crime sprees that have resulted in the death of innocent citizens.

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Another witness, Janet Schlacter, said her husband left her with a mountain of debts and not enough money to feed their children when he was given a new identity by the government.

Mrs. Schlacter sobbed, "Your pride is crushed, you try to withdraw as much as possible from public view."

Her husband, Douglas, cooperated in the government's investigation of former CIA agents Edwin P. Wilson and Frank Terpil, who are charged with illegally exporting explosives to Libya, training Libyan terrorists and conspiring to assassinate a Libyan dissident in Egypt.

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Mrs. Schlacter, a Virginia resident who declined to say what town she lives in, said she owes \$40,000 in bills her husband has not paid while he now lives with another woman.

"The federal government was in fact promoting adultery with my tax dollars while my children go without proper medical and dental care and without a proper balanced diet," she said.

*EXCERPTED*